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Guide to Heating Assistance

Utility Shut-offs for Non-payment

Under certain circumstances, a heating utility is not allowed to shut off the heat, even for non-payment. These circumstances are:

- if everyone in the household is over 65;
- if the consumer can demonstrate to the company that he or she is unable to pay the bill, and that someone who lives in the home is seriously ill or is a child under the age of one.

To qualify, contact the utility company and explain the situation. The utility is likely to ask for a copy of the child's birth certificate or other pertinent information, such as written proof of illness from a physician and/or proof of inability to pay based upon income.

There is also a **winter moratorium** in place every year from November 15 to March 15. During those months, gas and electric companies cannot shut off service because of inability to pay. This moratorium does not apply however, if service was shut off for non-payment before November 15.

Payment Options

Consumers may seek help from the local fuel assistance office if they are having trouble paying utility bills. The consumer does not have to be unemployed to get help. In addition, utility companies can work out discount, budget and payment plans.

General Information about Heating Oil Contracts

There are two types of contracts available to home heating oil consumers: a "fixed price contract," and a "capped price contract." With a fixed price, the consumer locks into a set price, meaning he or she will pay a certain price per gallon for the entire season, even if the cost of home heating oil goes up or down. With a capped price contract, the oil company puts a maximum price or "cap" on the cost of oil during the season. So if the cost goes down, the consumer may pay less.

Before entering into a contract with a home heating oil company, ask questions.

- Know what the start and end dates for the contract are and what the cost per gallon is.
- Make sure to get all the details in writing and carefully read all of the terms before signing.
- Keep a copy of the contract and any other related paperwork, including any advertisements the company placed at the time of purchase.

If an oil dealer violates the terms of either agreement, the Attorney General's Office may be able to help.

Propane

Propane gas for heating and home use presents issues different than those encountered with other home energy sources. Propane is difficult to comparison shop and consumers must consider a variety of factors in order to determine whether they are getting the best value. In some cases, the propane dealer, not the consumer, owns the tank. This is especially relevant if you want to switch dealers.

Propane is also priced differently from oil or gas, and you may be charged a higher rate if you use very little fuel each year. Many propane dealers offer a balanced billing payment plan that allows you to spread out annual costs over many months, lowering the cost of seasonally higher bills. Remember to read all contract terms carefully, and inquire about all fees and charges.

For more information...

To report unfair and deceptive conduct or to apply for free mediation services:

Office of Attorney General Maura Healey
www.mass.gov/ago/consumercomplaint
(617) 727-8400

For heating assistance:

Cold Relief Heatline
www.mass.gov/dhcd
(800) 632-8175

Salvation Army Good Neighbor Energy Fund
www.use.salvationarmy.org
(800) 334-3047
From area code 413: (800) 262-1320

For oil heat only:

Citizens Energy
www.citizensenergy.com
1 (877) 563-4645